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PROTECTION OF MINORITIES

Written statement submitted by the Baha'i International Community, a non-governmental organization in consultative status (Category II)

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement, which is distributed in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1296 (XLIV).

[15 July 1994]

1. The Baha'i International Community commends the Sub-Commission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities, and especially its Special Rapporteur, Mr. Asbjørn Eide, on its efforts to determine "Possible ways and means of facilitating the peaceful and constructive solution of problems involving minorities" (E/CN.4/Sub.2/1993/34 and addenda).

2. Over one year has passed since the Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National, or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities was adopted by the General Assembly. Now both Governments and individual citizens face the challenge of implementing these standards. Sadly, the reality of life for many minorities bears no resemblance to the minimum human rights standards set forth in this document. Members of the very minority groups whom the declaration was designed to protect are still experiencing intense suffering and anguish in a number of violent conflicts ranging around the world.

3. In the view of the Baha'i International Community, responsibility for ensuring equal rights for minorities falls on both majorities and minorities. Majorities have a special responsibility, for the sake of justice, to bring about the social and political adjustments which will enable minorities to exercise, to the fullest extent possible, their common and fundamental rights. Minorities, on the other hand, have a moral responsibility to respond honourably to genuine efforts by majorities and, as stated by the Rapporteur to "recognize and respect their duties to the society at large" (E/CN.4/Sub.2/1993/34/Add.4, para. 20). Both must view minority issues in the context of an increasingly interdependent world. In such a world, the advantage of the part is best served by ensuring the advantage of the whole; likewise, the whole cannot flourish when parts are oppressed or deprived.

4. The need then is to identify the conditions which disenfranchise certain minorities and to urge Governments to enact legislation which will equip these minorities to claim their just rights and will redress their grievances. Such action, however, will not be sufficient to ensure that minorities enjoy the same rights as their fellow citizens. Attitudes must change. There must be a shift in the view of majorities towards oppressed minorities, and minorities must be freed from the sense of helplessness induced by prolonged discrimination.

5. The challenge of changing attitudes, however, is not entirely within the ability of Governments to meet, as it calls for the influence of spiritual and moral principle. The Baha'i International Community believes that the principle which must govern any consideration of minority rights is the oneness of humanity. Often, ignorance of our common humanity encourages irrational fears and hatreds which are easily fuelled by distorted notions of other cultures. In order to move towards a genuine desire for mutual understanding, for "pluralism in togetherness", as described by Mr. Eide (E/CN.4/Sub.2/1993/34, chap. II.B), the diversity of the human family must be recognized as a source of enrichment rather than as a threat.

6. We support the call by the Special Rapporteur for schools to teach both respect for human rights and appreciation of diversity: "Human rights education," Mr Eide suggests, "should be made a core curriculum subject in universal primary education" (E/CN.4/Sub.2/1993/34/Add.4, para. 4). "The curricula in all States should teach tolerance of all groups. Majority groups should learn about the cultures of minority groups in ways which make it possible for them to appreciate those cultures as an enrichment to society as a whole" (ibid., paras. 9 and 10).

7. To achieve a lasting resolution of minority problems, however, education must be supported by a commitment to ethical and spiritual principles. The operation of these principles imbues both majorities and minorities with a consciousness of their reciprocal moral responsibilities as fellow human beings. This sense of responsibility vitalizes such civilizing virtues as forbearance and compassion towards all people. It emboldens the voice of conscience and employs the language of the heart where the language of civil law exerts no influence. The practical influence of such spiritual values on social order cannot be overly emphasized. In an age of turbulent transition, a widespread consciousness of the oneness of mankind would allow minorities to be seen as an integral part of every society. Old animosities based upon

ethnic, linguistic and religious differences would thus be rendered obsolete, thwarting attempts to manipulate groups against each other for political purposes.

8. The Baha'i International Community is convinced that, if the immense human rights efforts being made by the United Nations and Governments are to bear fruit, the combined force of political and legal, spiritual and moral influences must be employed. For its part, the Baha'i International Community is attempting to address these challenges within its own membership throughout the world. Baha'i communities are obliged by the teachings of their faith not just to accept, but to nurture, encourage, and safeguard every minority belonging to any faith, race, class, or nation within it. For that reason, the Baha'i Writings suggest that if any discrimination at all is to be tolerated, it should be in favour of the minority. Guided by the unifying principles of world order brought more than a century ago by Baha'u'llah, the Founder of the Baha'i Faith, Baha'i communities worldwide are attempting to integrate people of all racial, national and religious backgrounds into a single community - a community that is both unified and diverse.

9. In support of the Special Rapporteur's recommendation that minorities be actively encouraged to participate in the life of the community (E/CN.4/Sub.2/1993/34/Add.4, para. 12), Baha'is have found radio stations to be highly effective. "Radio Baha'i" in Ecuador, for example, serves the indigenous rural inhabitants of the Otavalo region. Broadcasting primarily in Quechua, the local language, the radio station aims to meet the needs, expressed by the listeners, for spiritual, cultural and material training. Local personnel have been trained on site in all aspects of running a radio station, including operating the equipment and developing the schedule. Programmes cover a range of topics including agricultural development, education, spirituality and public affairs. The local culture is nurtured and preserved by featuring local story-tellers and music recorded at station-sponsored annual indigenous music festivals. Similar stations have been established in rural Bolivia, Chile, Panama, Peru and the United States of America.

10. The Baha'i International Community would like to commend UNESCO, and particularly its International Bureau of Education (IBE), for organizing an interreligious round table on "The contribution of religions in education for international understanding". Such a meeting is certainly in line with Mr. Eide's recommendation that meetings to promote greater understanding amongst all people be developed and encouraged (E/CN.4/Sub.2/1993/34/Add.4, para. 69). The Bahai'i International Community is delighted to be able to participate in this round table discussion during the Conference of Ministers of Education of the IBE member States in October 1994.

11. We welcome the Sub-Commission's practical emphasis on ways and means of facilitating the peaceful and constructive solution of problems involving minorities. If Governments or civic organizations would find it useful, the Baha'i International Community is ready to offer its experience in establishing communities characterized by unity and respect for diversity.